

# The Floating Church of Loch Sunart

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One of the most serious problems faced by the Free Church of Scotland immediately after the Disruption was the hostile attitude of landed proprietors. Congregations had to gain the acquiescence, if not the goodwill, of landowners on whom they depended to grant them sites. Such goodwill was frequently absent and as time passed it became clear that there were many instances where a landowner's refusal to grant a site amounted to more than momentary intransigence. Moreover, some congregations lived on estates so large as to preclude any appeal other than to a sole proprietor. Where these two conditions prevailed an intractable situation arose. Landowners would not grant sites for the churches, manses and schools that the Free Church sought to build, nor could their hand be forced. At the same time, the sight of Christian congregations worshipping in the open, in scenes reminiscent of covenanting times, was calculated to excite sympathy for the seceders and to exert a shaming influence on site-refusers. One of the most celebrated instances of site-refusal occurred on the Ardnamurchan estate of Sir James Milles Riddell. For Sir James, the confrontation involved a landowner's most basic concerns: his duty to support the Established Church and to seek the good of his tenantry, as he perceived it. Any concession made to the seceders on humanitarian grounds would, he believed, be prejudicial to the first and inimical to the second. He therefore felt duty bound to maintain an attitude of inflexible hostility in the hope that a reversion to the Established Church would end the sufferings of his exposed tenants.

To the Free Church, the issue appeared one of liberty of conscience, the right of any Christian church to worship as it chose and to make provision for its congregations. Admittedly, the Disruption was different from any previous secession in that for the first time an attempt was being made to parallel the national provision of religion by the Established Church. However, the leaders of the new denomination were at pains to emphasize their social and political conservatism. It was felt that, to a large extent, the hostility of certain proprietors was based on a misapprehension of the character of the Free Church.

The estrangement which arose between Sir James and his tenantry focused attention on an area which had not historically enjoyed overmuch of the Church's interest.<sup>1</sup> The ancient parish of

See W. Ferguson, "The problems of the established church in the West Highlands and Islands in the eighteenth century", *ante*, xvii (1969), 15-31; Mary McHugh "The religious condition of the Highlands and Islands in the mid-eighteenth century", *Innes Review*, xxxv (1984), 12-21.

Ardnamurchan was extensive and unmanageable. When Dr Begg visited in the summer of 1845 he "travelled a whole day from one end of Ardnamurchan towards the other, and did not reach it".<sup>2</sup> In the Inverness-shire districts of the parish: Moidart, Arisaig and South Morar, Roman Catholicism prevailed, a condition seen by the Free Church as symptomatic of neglect. The Argyllshire portion, the districts of Ardnamurchan and Sunart, an area approximately 40 miles in length, comprised the Riddell estate. Here the people adhered, with few exceptions, to the Established Church. However, as so often in Scotland, one of the exceptions was the proprietor himself.

As an Episcopalian, Sir James had nonetheless presided over a great expansion in the accommodation of the National Church, whose objects he willingly promoted. A new church was built at Kilchoan in 1831 and about the same time Acharacle and Strontian were erected into *quoad sacra* parishes.<sup>3</sup> There was also a Royal Bounty Station meeting house at Laga. Ardnamurchan, however, still did not offer a tempting prospect to aspiring clergy. For it was not only in respect of religious provision that changes had been wrought there. A social transformation had been effected, one commented on by the parish minister: "Were the writer of the last Statistical Account to revisit his parish . . . He would be not less struck with changes in its social aspect, the absence of congenial society for himself, of the beneficial influence of superior knowledge and station in the eldership; and the snapping of the link which connected the great landed proprietors with the mass of the people, arising from the almost total disappearance of the gentleman tacksman".<sup>4</sup>

A social gulf had opened between the Riddells, originally a Linlithgow family and purchasers of land forfeited after the Forty-five, and their Gaelic-speaking tenantry, surviving at the humblest level of existence. The process of social polarisation had doubtless been accelerated by the extensive "improvements" of 1828. The evictions resulting from these changes, together with later removals at Swordles in 1853 have resulted in Riddell's appearance as one of the minor but still reviled actors in the drama of the Highland Clearances.<sup>5</sup> Recent research suggests that earlier views of Riddell have been unduly harsh. Indeed, he appears to have held back from wholesale evictions at a time when mounting rent arrears made them seem a necessary evil. The Riddell estates were seriously affected by the famine which began in 1846 but the proprietor's

<sup>2</sup> *Free Church Magazine*, 1845, 313.

<sup>3</sup> *New Statistical Account*, Argyll, 147-8. [Hereafter cited *N.S.A.*].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>5</sup> A. Mackenzie, *The History of the Highland Clearances* (Inverness, 1883), 232-4; see also M. E. M. Donaldson, *Further wanderings — mainly in Argyll* (Paisley, 1927), 258-9, 275-6.

response was patience in respect of arrears and encouragement of public works. The problems of the estate, after being placed in the care of trustees for a period, were perhaps only solved in 1855 when the Ardnamurchan portion was sold to John James Dalgleish, the Riddells remaining in possession of Sunart.<sup>6</sup> The contemporary estimate of Sir James by his tenants was that, despite his intemperance on the issue of sites, he was an otherwise humane and kindly proprietor. Particularly when judged by the standards of the time, this seems fair comment.

The districts of Ardnamurchan and Sunart were contained in a virtual peninsula, Ardnamurchan Point being the most westerly projection of the Scottish mainland, while to the south Loch Sunart stretched deep inland. To the north and east, Loch Shiel completed this near-encirclement. Sir James's mansion house was at Strontian, which lay at the head of Loch Sunart, and on the north shore. It formed the largest centre of population on the estate and around it a *quoad sacra* parish had been erected, a parliamentary church having been built in 1827. Strontian had long supported a substantial population, in part because of the fertile strath at whose mouth it lay, more so because of the lead-mines in the hills above the village. Once the scene of great activity by the York Buildings Company,<sup>7</sup> the mines were still being worked by some 40 or 50 men when Robert Somers visited in the autumn of 1847.<sup>8</sup> But their living was precarious and the mines ceased work altogether in 1855.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the wealth of the estate lay in the rich natural woodlands which gave the area such a prosperous appearance (by Highland standards) to Dr Begg. Begg reported a contract to supply 1500 tons of birch per annum to a Glasgow company over a twelve-year period.<sup>10</sup> In 1843, Riddell estimated that some £900 would be raised from the sale of oak alone.<sup>11</sup> Somers described how ceaseless wood-cutting took place, most of it birch which went to supply a pirln factory at Salen.<sup>12</sup>

However, for several years before the Disruption, Strontian and its environs had witnessed another kind of activity. The Rev. Alexander MacIntyre, a probationer and supporter of the non-

<sup>6</sup> J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976), 42, 56; R. Somers, *Letters from the Highlands; or the Famine of 1847* (London, 1848); E. Richards, *A History of the Highland Clearances* (London, 1982), 475-6. Richards gives the impression that the entire Riddell estates were sold. That this was not so can be seen from *Return of Owners of Lands and Heritages, Scotland 1874*, lxxii.

<sup>7</sup> *N.S.A.*, 140-1; D. Murray, *The York Buildings Company: A Chapter in Scottish History* (Glasgow, 1883), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Somers, *Letters*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> F. H. Groome, *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* (1882-5), vi, 415.

<sup>10</sup> *Free Church Magazine* 1845, 340.

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Record Office [SRO], GD 241/168/3/53, Riddell to James Rolland, 5 Aug. 1843.

<sup>12</sup> Somers, *Letters*, 151.



intrusion party, is credited with making Strontian, and the district of Sunart generally, more inclined towards the Free Church than the rest of the estate.<sup>13</sup> The Rev. Finlay Macpherson, Free Church minister of Kilbrandon, estimated fully half the Ardnamurchan tenantry as adhering to the Free Church.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the proportion, the secession was certainly large at Strontian from where the tenants petitioned Sir James for a site on 1 June 1843.

A barrier to any quick resolution of the matter was Sir James's absence on the continent. When the tenants' missive caught up with him in Salzburg a month later, it received a full, if discouraging, reply. In a letter addressed to "my dear friends", Sir James expatiated on the character of what he called the Separatists:

"My good friends, examine the conduct of the separating party, . . . and calmly and dispassionately ask the following questions of yourselves, and let your unbiassed judgment answer them. Have the words or actions of the Separatists redounded to God's glory, or evinced peace and good will towards men?

On the contrary, have they not shown contempt for the existing laws, and led others to disobey them? Have they not been guilty of persecution? Have they not bid defiance to the powers that be? Have they not broken up society from its very foundation, and sown the seeds of dissension and discord throughout the whole length and breadth of the land — in every parish and in every private dwelling? Have they not reviled, calumniated, and threatened all who dare to differ from them? Are these the men to whose preaching you look forward as the means of grace to you? Is this the party for whose sake you will desert the Church of your fathers, which has for two centuries (God's grace assisting) conferred such inestimable blessings on Scotland?"<sup>15</sup>

In a less rhetorical vein, Sir James wrote a month later to his solicitor in Edinburgh, James Rolland, and in this letter he articulated his general opposition to the Free Church:

"I am sorry that you feel regret at the course which I have taken in the Church question — for I can assure you, that there never was one, on which I was obliged to decide, that forced conviction upon me more strongly. I never had a doubt on the subject. Every successive act of the Separatists confirmed my opinions, and I could not have answered to my conscience for having acted otherwise than I have done. My principle is that

<sup>13</sup> A. Cameron, *The Floating Church of Strontian* (Oban, 1953), 2; also "The Floating Church", *Scots Magazine*, July 1946, 249-53.

<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Refusal to grant Sites for Churches in Scotland*, 1847, xiii, 2nd Report, 97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-3.

possessing property, and a stake in the country, there is a duty imposed upon me, to give all the support in my power to the civil and religious institutions of the state, provided that they are founded on the constitution, and are not at variance with the revealed word of God”.

Anxious to remove any personal element from the debate he continued:

“... when I talk and write on the subject I do so entirely considering it a great public question, deeply affecting the public weal. And I act in the matter, in order to preserve to the best of my judgment, the peace and happiness of my tenants, and their present and future welfare”.<sup>16</sup>

Concern for his tenants, however, did not precipitate any speedy return to Sunart. From Salzburg, Sir James progressed to Rome and did not return until some time in 1844. In the meantime, an agreement had been drafted between his tenants and the factor, William Kennedy, a man later to be condemned as “a violent Moderate”,<sup>17</sup> to allow tented shelter for the congregation at Strontian that winter. But the restrictive conditions with which the offer was hedged proved unacceptable and the concession was rejected. This drew an intemperate response from the proprietor:

“The refusal of the boon offered, proves to me that the Dissenting party aim at nothing short of the complete overthrow of the Church established in Scotland. My eyes being more than ever opened to the intentions of the leading men among the Dissenters — for I consider the poor people as being deluded, and put in the foreground merely for the purpose of carrying these intentions the more easily into execution — I cannot regret the refusal of the boon offered. The door is now closed, not by me, but by the people themselves, against all future concession on my part”.<sup>18</sup>

An impasse had been reached, one which now awaited action at national level. It was at the Assembly in May 1845 that site-refusal emerged as a widespread problem and a committee was set up, under Sheriff Graham Speirs, to tackle it. The summer was then used to gather information before the Assembly re-convened at Inverness in August. Dr Begg’s was only one of a number of deputations despatched into the remoter parts of the country, but he was thereafter to ensure that the people’s conflict with their proprietor in Ardnamurchan became one of the best-known.

Yet the tenants on Riddell’s estate were by no means the worst

<sup>16</sup> SRO, GD 241/168/3/53.

<sup>17</sup> By Finlay Macpherson in his return to the Free Church sites committee. SRO, CH 3/138/4, 24 Feb. 1847.

<sup>18</sup> *Free Church Magazine*, 1845, 341-2.

sufferers. The Free Church congregation in the parish of Torosay in Mull had to meet in a gravel-pit, while in Eigg the minister was unable to remain on the island because of proprietorial hostility. On the Duke of Buccleuch's vast estates the congregation at Canonbie were hounded in their attempts to worship in any available place of shelter and at Wanlockhead the natural hazards of open-air worship were compounded by the village's extreme elevation.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it should be noted that adequate church accommodation in Ardnamurchan was still a relative novelty. Until a short time before, the services of the Established Church had often been conducted in similar circumstances to those now faced by the Free Church.<sup>20</sup> The sufferings of the people were real, but they were not unfamiliar.

After Dr Begg's report, the sites committee moved swiftly. The Rev. Patrick Macfarlan presuming on a tenuous past acquaintance with Sir James, wrote to him "to say a few words on behalf of the Free Church".<sup>21</sup> He then continued in a way which Riddell might have been excused for thinking rather pointed:

"... With all deference, it does appear to me that your opposition rests on an erroneous impression of the principles and objects of the leaders of the Free Church; an impression which I think you would not have received if you had been residing in Scotland when events were in progress towards the disruption of the Church ...".

He then assured Riddell of the resolution of the people in their chosen course and put it to him that the question he must ask himself was:

"... Shall I allow the people on my estate to enjoy the ministrations of religion under the only ministers to whom they are willing to submit, and in connection with the only Church to which they are willing to adhere?"

This approach elicited no response and Speirs himself was forced to write in December. He argued the case first for a stated ministry and advanced an argument which gives an intriguing clue to what was taking place on the estate.

"While the Committee believe that the attachment of the people in that district, who originally joined the Free Church, had not been impaired by the adverse circumstances under which they have so patiently suffered for more than two years and a half, it is needless to disguise the apprehensions they feel

<sup>19</sup> T. Brown, *Annals of the Disruption* (Edinburgh, 1893) 420-45; N. L. Walker, *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1895), 41-7.

<sup>20</sup> *N.S.A.*, 162.

<sup>21</sup> *Committee on Sites, 1st Report*, 95.

that such a state of matters is very unfavourable to the spiritual interests of those people. To the Establishment they will never return; and, deprived of the pastoral superintendence of their ministers, it may be that unlearned men among themselves may become their teachers, and much evil be the result".<sup>22</sup>

Speirs then asked for a re-consideration of the request for a site adding:

"If the Committee considered it necessary to say anything in support of so just and reasonable a request, they would simply refer to your letter, dated Salzburg, 4th July 1843, wherein you state, 'that you have no right, and claim none, to interfere with any man's liberty of conscience'".

In conclusion, he rejected the libels levelled against the Free Church and put it to Riddell that:

"It now remains for you, . . . to determine whether they are still to be excluded from the rights and privileges of a Christian people and of British subjects, because they belong to a church for the soundness and purity of whose standards of faith and practice, the names of Chalmers, Gordon, Brown, Buchanan, and many others of her ministers; . . . are the living sureties and witnesses."

Riddell's response was swift and illustrated that, in any battle of words, he could normally call on superior numbers. He pointed to the increased provision of churches and schools "where the truths of Christianity are taught, without reference to controverted points . . .

I bring forward this subject on the present occasion merely for the purpose of showing that sufficient church and school accommodation have been provided for the inhabitants, and that it is in consequence of so many having been withdrawn from the church wherein they received the holy rite of baptism, that these are exposed to the hardships and apparent ignominy of having no regular and decent place of worship. It is in consequence, also, of their having been led astray from the ministrations of the regularly ordained clergy, who were placed over them for their spiritual good and edification, that they find themselves deprived of pastoral superintendence, and subjected to the teaching of illiterate laymen. For these evils, which no man can deplore more than myself, I am not responsible. A few years ago the inhabitants of my estate lived together in harmony and peace like members of one family; with a few exceptions, they met together for public and social worship in buildings dedicated to the service of God, whom

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



they worshipped in the unity of the Spirit. Now all is changed; instead of exercising brotherly love and Christian charity in their intercourse with each other, they are taught to regard all who differ from them with feelings of hostility and distrust. The ministers of the Established Church have been reviled and held up to scorn, and that high and holy Name, at the mention of which every knee should bow, has been profaned by the manner in which a frequent and irreverent use is made of it, to serve the interests of a party.

With these things constantly before my eyes, it cannot be a matter of surprise to any person not blinded by party zeal that I find it impossible, conscientiously, to grant sites for churches, manses, and schools, which would imply a sanction on my part, and give perpetuity on my estates, to a system which I believe to be anti-social and anti-Christian".<sup>21</sup>

Riddell then addressed himself to the charge that he was denying his tenants liberty of conscience:

"I am not aware that I have in any respect transgressed this rule, although I have witnessed with pain and sorrow, week after week, those whose spiritual good I am bound to use all the means in my power to advance, exposed to danger, physically and morally, from the inclemency of the weather, and from the teaching of men certainly not qualified by their knowledge, their wisdom, or their previous education, and therefore not authorized to instruct others in the Sacred Scriptures.

But, you say, that to avoid this evil you desire that Churches may be built and manses erected, in order that ministers may be appointed under whose pastoral superintendence the people may be placed. But if these things were done, what assurance could I have that the ministers appointed would not use their superior knowledge and power over the minds and consciences of the people, in fomenting a warfare with the members of the Established Church, in interfering with the ministrations of the clergy, and would, by keeping up a constant excitement and agitation, . . . become disturbers of the public peace?"

The possibility of a change of heart on the proprietor's part was hedged with many conditions:

". . . I must observe a great change in the conduct and language of some of the influential leaders of this great movement; I must know that the person and authority of the sovereign are honoured and obeyed; that obedience to the laws is enforced; that a regard to social order and Christian charity

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-8.



are inculcated by precept and example on the part of the clergy; that the law of God is taught as the rule of life to all classes; and further, that countenance is withdrawn and for the future withheld from illiterate laymen, who assume the part of teachers, — before I can conscientiously dispense any portion of my land, . . . to promote the object for which it has been asked”.

Here the exchange of letters ceased. Few could have guessed that the resolution of the problem was already in the making.

However, it is worth pausing at this point to consider the religious state of Ardnamurchan and Sunart at this time. Reference has already been made to the probationer Alexander MacIntyre. Immediately after the Disruption, the congregation at Strontian attempted to call him, but he declined. The call was repeated the following year but MacIntyre was reluctant to respond. In November 1845, he informed the Presbytery that he was happy to continue on the existing basis but that “. . . in present circumstances it was his duty to decline the call”.<sup>24</sup> One factor in his decision must certainly have been the dim prospect of sites being granted for church or manse, but one is left with the impression that his reluctance was due to more than pessimism about the future. In 1847, he was sent to North America by the Free Church Colonial Committee.<sup>25</sup>

This was perhaps for the best, for it removed Sir James’s principal antagonist. Had he stayed it might only have perpetuated the breach between landowner and tenants, for Riddell had taken exception to the manner in which MacIntyre had expressed himself. In particular he was alleged to have urged the people “to shun, for God’s sake, as they valued their salvation, the black, polluted walls of the Established Church, lest the vengeance of Heaven should overtake them”. He was also alleged to have described Moderates as “. . . the offspring of the cursed sect of the Pharisees” and “a sect established by the devil himself”.<sup>26</sup> Finlay Macpherson sought to defend his colleague, conceding that “. . . he may, in preaching, use what I call strong language, to warn sinners of their danger, and to flee from the wrath to come; but language of the kind which has been read, I never heard attributed to him”.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the truth of the matter, MacIntyre’s activities certainly discomfited the proprietor.

He was not, of course, the only minister active on the estate. The Rev. Peter Maclean of Tobermory, Rev. John McRae of

<sup>24</sup> Free Church College, Edinburgh, Minutes of the Free Presbytery of Lorn and Mull, 18 Nov. 1845. I am grateful to Calum M. Ferguson for making these available to me.

<sup>25</sup> Cameron, *The Floating Church*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Committee on Sites, 2nd Report*, 91; *3rd Report*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, *2nd Report*, 95.

Knockbain, and the aforementioned Finlay Macpherson all lent support. It appears that shelter was sometimes available. In Ardnarmurchan proper, an old schoolhouse held a congregation of 300 while a much smaller group worshipped in a farmhouse at Laga.<sup>28</sup> Private dwellings afforded a last resort but this carried a risk. Macpherson believed that in several instances the factor had evicted Free Church adherents or enforced conformity by threat of removal. At the Assembly in 1846 Speirs gave voice to the fear that proprietors were "sending away or ejecting the Free Church population, in order that they may in that way take away the pretext for asking sites".<sup>29</sup>

Sheriff Speirs had by this time produced at least a partial answer in the shape of an iron floating church, or churches — for he set no limit on the number which might be produced. Addressing the Commission of the Free Assembly in November 1845, he revealed that he had placed a contract with Mr John Wood of Port Glasgow for an iron church capable of containing 700 sitters. No destination had yet been fixed on for it though in the course of his speech Kilmalie, Strachur and Lochcarron were mentioned as suitable. He then concluded with a rhetorical flourish:

"I sincerely trust, and I am sure the Commission will unite with me in prayer to God, that this vessel, to be launched to preserve His testimony, may be preserved, that this ark, for the preservation of His own Word among our distant congregations, may be kept safe on the bosom of the deep, until the waters of bitterness have subsided, and peace be restored, when the congregations, returning each to his own sequestered vale or hillside, may then be permitted to erect their own tabernacle, and to send forth their praises to Him who, through much suffering and tribulation, has brought them to see His great salvation".<sup>30</sup>

This was not the first occasion on which the Free Church had benefited from the assistance of John Wood (1788-1860). The distinguished shipbuilder, who had made his reputation with the construction of Henry Bell's *Comet*, also helped to build the Free Church yacht *Breadalbane*. In that case he had "... gratuitously furnished the designs and otherwise forwarded the work" for the vessel which was launched at the Bay of Quick yard of John Barnhill & Co. in 1844.<sup>31</sup> On this occasion, his involvement may have gone no further than placing the work with John Reid & Co. of Port Glasgow. Wood was related to Reid through marriage and

<sup>28</sup> SRO, CH3/138/4; *Committee on Sites, 2nd Report*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland* [hereafter PGAFCS], 1846, 110.

<sup>30</sup> *Witness*, 22 Nov. 1845.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 Sept. 1844.

was also his business partner, although he played no active rôle in the yard itself, having never made the transition to building in iron.<sup>32</sup> The construction of the church was supervised by Robert Brown of Fairlie, who had been similarly involved with the *Breadalbane*.

Possibly on account of the novelty of her design, the iron church progressed more slowly than had been expected. Instead of being ready by the spring, Speirs had to inform the Assembly in May that she was not yet completed. Nor had a destination been fixed on for her, indeed it seems that a peripatetic rôle may even have been envisaged. This rather ignored the vessel's unseaworthiness and complete lack of propulsive power, a factor of which Speirs, with a background of naval service, can scarcely have been unaware. By the end of June the church was finished and on the evening of Wednesday, 8 July the steamer *Conqueror* began her tow to Loch Sunart. The church enjoyed a very fine passage round the Mull of Kintyre and reached her destination in bright sunshine and calm conditions on the Friday morning. Sufficient notice of her arrival had been given to excite public interest and as she was towed past Tobermory the inhabitants climbed the house-tops to catch a glimpse of her. On her passage up the loch, people had poured from their houses, some running to high ground and waving handkerchiefs.<sup>33</sup>

In mooring the vessel, care had been taken not to antagonise Sir James unnecessarily by placing it in the most obvious location at the mouth of the river Strontian which would have been in sight of the mansion house. This was a point Speirs was later to make in order to counter charges that the Free Church had sometimes built their churches close to those of the Establishment with deliberate and malicious intent.<sup>34</sup> At the cost of slight inconvenience to the congregation, a mooring was chosen below the township of Ardnastang, in the bay of Eilean a'Mhuirich, about 1¼ miles west of Strontian. By three o'clock on the Friday afternoon, she was safely moored about 150 yards offshore. The church being ready for public worship the congregation were ferried out that Sunday morning between the hours of ten and twelve. A large blue flag flew from the church bearing in large characters the inscription "An Eaglais Shaor".

Rev. Peter Maclean of Tobermory and Mr Kennedy of the Free Church, Dornoch, preached in turn, with a probationer, Mr McColl, in the evening. An attender described the church as "... not only commodious, but in every respect most comfortable; and

<sup>32</sup> W. F. Macarthur, *History of Port Glasgow* (1932), 114; J. Shields *Clyde Built* (Glasgow, 1947); *Shipbuilding and Shipping Record*, lxxv, 1945, 213; Mitchell Library, Glasgow, Wotherspoon Collection, vol. 13, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Scottish Guardian*, 24 July 1846, letter from Alexander MacIntyre.

<sup>34</sup> *Committee on Sites, 1st Report*, 9.

one could almost imagine himself, when seated therein, as listening to the ministrations of the gospel in one of the neater churches of the metropolis. The peculiarity, however, of the mode of ingress and egress brought vividly but sadly before my mind the melancholy fact, that an otherwise humane Scottish proprietor should so little sympathise with the religious feeling of his tenantry, as to compel them, after worshipping for three years on the shelterless hillside, to seek at last, for conscience sake, a place of refuge on the sea . . . ”.<sup>35</sup>

The church was indeed curious, with its low freeboard and high superstructure it looked like what it was intended to be; a building designed to float. A pulpit and vestry were at the bow, the congregation entering from the stern of the vessel. Benches were provided for 700, accessible from a passage down one side of the vessel. Light was admitted through three skylights.<sup>36</sup>

Finlay Macpherson left the following account of its operation: “It is exceedingly neat and comfortable — fit to accommodate 1,000 hearers, and has been constructed and moored in its present station at a very great expense to the Free Church. No one can scarcely enter it without feeling a peculiar solemnity, remembering the cause for which this devoted and interesting congregation have been compelled thus to assemble there and to worship their God on the bosom of the deep. In stormy weather it is rather inconvenient and it is always tedious for such a large congregation to get on board and afterwards to get ashore. When I preached there the day was very short so that the darkness of night was coming on before we could leave the Floating Church and notwithstanding the provision made by having good boats in attendance and strong cables fixed to the shore the passage tho’ short was rather unpleasant, the boats being much crowded and the shore so rocky and rough and slippery as a landing place”.<sup>37</sup>

The floating church served its purpose in outwitting one particular proprietor in one particular location, but it was clearly not a solution with a broader application. Floating churches did not come cheap. Although the contract price was £1,400 Speirs estimated that other expenses would push the cost of the project to nearer £2,000.<sup>38</sup> In addition, any church with its hull in the water was liable to incur high maintenance costs. Three years after its arrival the church was “. . . much in need of being repaired and properly repainted”.<sup>39</sup> The inconvenience in operating the church has already been described but a more substantial objection to

<sup>35</sup> *Witness*, 22 July 1846.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *Annals*, 655-7; SRO, RHP 38150/3, copy of plan of floating church from original in Free Church College.

<sup>37</sup> SRO, CH3/138/4.

<sup>38</sup> *PGAFCS*, 1846, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Presbytery minutes, 19 Sept. 1849.



further building was the threat of redundancy. Sites had been granted in several areas mentioned as possible locations for the church even as she was being built. While many proprietors still resisted, sufficient relented to allow the Free Church a degree of optimism about the future. In short, it was widely perceived that the floating church was a means to an end rather than an end in itself and in that rôle she acquitted herself admirably.

Sir James's attitude now began to soften and on the occasion of a visit from Dr Beith he indicated his willingness that the church should be landed or moored in some creek.<sup>40</sup> Though he was not quite ready to grant a site, this still represented an advance. However, it is the hand of Providence which has traditionally been credited with the resolution of the issue. At an indeterminate date, the church is said to have been blown ashore and Sir James thereafter to have countenanced its new location. This may be an accurate and sufficient explanation but it does not give credit to the proprietor's changing views. By 1848, he was in correspondence with J. M. Hog, who had succeeded to the convenership of the sites committee on the death of Graham Speirs. It is clear that a permanent site was on offer, albeit subject to conditions. Sir James was apparently still concerned about the influence of "the Men" and had been asked by Hog about the degree of lay participation he would tolerate. He replied that he "... had no intention or desire, to preclude persons, properly qualified by education and previous knowledge, from officiating as ministers or teachers, but I should require to know that they were approved of and appointed by the Free Church presbytery, within which my estate is situated, in fact to be assured that they hold themselves amenable to spiritual authority".<sup>41</sup> The presbytery minutes record further activity the following year giving the impression that the erection of a proper church was imminent. Yet the matter fades from view. What happened?

The answer lies in a balance of probabilities. It seems unlikely that negotiations with the proprietor broke down, having progressed so far. This would run counter to the general experience of congregations who were gradually achieving their goals. By 1850, the sites committee was able to report that "The battle of sites had been virtually won".<sup>42</sup> In 1854, the committee was discharged altogether "there being now no outstanding cases before the Church".<sup>43</sup>

Positive evidence of Riddell's goodwill can be seen in the report of the manse-building committee that same year. The Strontian congregation had succeeded in being recognised by the

<sup>40</sup> *Committee on Sites. 3rd Report*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> Presbytery minutes, 20 Dec. 1848.

<sup>42</sup> *PGAFCs*, 1850, 240.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1854, 210.

Sustentation Committee as a sanctioned charge and called the probationer sent to work in the district to be their fixed pastor. The Rev. John Macqueen was duly ordained in June 1853, but his home was described as “. . . a miserable cottage, fit only for a labourer or a shepherd” and a danger to the health of his family. The committee reported that “A site, after being long withheld, had now been conceded” and was prepared to make a grant of £150.<sup>44</sup>

But what is equally telling about the committee’s award is its exceptional nature. Strontian was the only successful new applicant out of 22. Proprietorial hostility may have been a problem, but a lack of material resources was far more threatening in its consequences. Even with the centralised finances of the Free Church to assist them, many Highland congregations were reckoned to be too poor to think even of applying for sites. In addition, there was the further problem of manpower, for the want of Gaelic-speaking ministers was only gradually remedied. In contrast to the success of Strontian, the situation in Ardnamurchan proper had regressed and by 1850 a great number of those who were at one time adherents of the Free Church in that district had reverted to the Establishment for want of Free Church provision.<sup>45</sup>

The House of Commons committee charged with the task of enquiring into site-refusal in Scotland reported in 1847 that the number of sites refused did not exceed 35, affecting congregations totalling 16,000 in numbers. These were distributed throughout the country but lay mainly in the counties of Dumfries, Inverness, Argyll, Moray and Aberdeen. This was contrasted with a total of 725 churches for which sites had been obtained, serving the needs of 700,000 to 800,000 Free Church adherents. Nevertheless, the committee recognised the problem faced by congregations on large estates and earnestly enjoined such proprietors as still resisted, now to grant sites. The committee’s chairman, Edward Pleydell Bouverie, obviously felt that matters had not progressed far enough and introduced a bill to force landowners to acquiesce.<sup>46</sup> The bill itself was lost, but it formed part of a successful campaign which pressured and cajoled but ultimately relied on patient persuasion and the removal of prejudice to achieve its goals.

The experience of Riddell’s tenants was therefore by no means unique. The reaction of their proprietor to their secession had been the instinctive one of many of his kind, and represented an uncoordinated but real attempt to strangle the Free Church at birth, or at least inhibit its growth. Like many others Riddell came round when convinced that his tenants could not be coerced into

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix xvii.

<sup>45</sup> Presbytery minutes, 26 June 1850; see also SRO, CH3/138/4 for Macpherson’s comment that “. . . our congregation there (Torosay) however is I am afraid on the decrease owing to the refusal of a site and other causes”.

<sup>46</sup> Walker, *Chapters*, 47.

conformity, and when he became increasingly aware of his isolation. Moreover, his worst fears of social and political disorder were allayed by experience and he soon came to find that the spiritual welfare of his tenants was best safeguarded by allowing the Free Church to provide for them.

The floating church remained in use throughout the ministry of John Macqueen (1853-67), though it would appear that it did so not because of site-refusal but simply because it was adequate for its purpose. A proper building was beyond the finances of a poor congregation, further impoverished by the famine of 1846-49. It was only with the arrival of a new minister, Alexander McLeod, that a fresh initiative was taken in the matter. Sir Thomas Riddell was amenable on the question of a site; all that remained was to raise the money. This entailed a journey south for the minister, for since his congregation were "made up solely of a labouring population" the necessary resources were not available locally.<sup>47</sup>

By 1873, the new church was completed.<sup>48</sup> The floating church's work was done and its journey to the scrapyard and into the annals of Scottish church history assured. In its time it had served as an adequate, if never wholly satisfactory, place of worship. Its more enduring achievement had been to act as a symbol of the Free Church's determination to overcome site refusal and make provision for its distant congregations. In so doing, it influenced the minds of men hitherto prejudiced against the Free Church and hastened the day when such unorthodox expedients were no longer necessary.

<sup>47</sup> Presbytery minutes, 14 Aug. 1867. Sir James died in 1861.

<sup>48</sup> Cameron, *The Floating Church*, 17-19.

